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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT CHIRAC'S PROSPECTS FOR 2005 AND BEYOND
-- KEEPING THE OPTIONS OPEN AND THE CHALLENGERS OFF BALANCE

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Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT FOR REASO

NS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Although, President Chirac lost some ground with France's electorate on domestic policy issues during 2004, he more than made up for it -- finishing the year with a strong public image -- by his performance on foreign policy issues. His projection of himself as a proud President, standing up for France (particularly versus the U.S.), gives him a touch of the grandeur of the de Gaulle era that resonates with much of the French public. If his overall popularity should hold steady, if he should win approval for the proposed EU Constitution in the upcoming referendum on it, and if the disarray and lack of stature among his likely challengers on the center-left persist, he will in all likelihood decide to run again in 2007. To do so he will also have to hold off former Interior and Finance Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, who is directly challenging Chirac for leadership of the center-right. The rivalry between Chirac and Sarkozy for control of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party will continue through 2005, which is shaping up as a fateful year for French politics. END SUMMARY

40 YEARS OF PUBLIC LIFE

2. (SBU) Jacques Chirac won his first election in 1965 (as a member of the city council of the town of Sainte-Fereole in the Correze region of southern France). He has not been out of politics, nor hardly out of office, since then. Reporters who have covered him over the years, and claim to know his character and state of mind, agree that he is much more likely to be in denial about retirement than planning for it. In this connection, media commentators also like to point to "the example" of Francois Mitterrand who was re-elected to a second term in 1988 at the age of 72 (Chirac's current age), and served as president until he was 79, when in May 1995 Chirac succeeded him. Recently asked what her husband would do when he retires from politics, Bernadette Chirac said, "Chirac in retirement? I don't see it." If elected president in 2007, Chirac would be 80 on leaving office in 2012. (French presidential terms were changed from seven years to five in 2000 during Chirac's "first" seven-year term.)

NOT ACTING AS IF HIS LEGACY WERE BEHIND HIM

3. (C) President Chirac's gusto for his job remains evident, particularly in its constitutionally unchecked dimension as head of state with full control over France's foreign policy. Chirac's performance defending his most recent (and rare) gamble with public opinion -- backing opening accession talks with Turkey though most Frenchmen and women are against Turkey's inclusion in the EU -- was energetic, lucid and forward-looking. The public, at least according to polls, generally approved of his engagement on the issue and of his defense of the decision to support opening accession talks with Turkey, notwithstanding their persisting skepticism about the wisdom of having Turkey join the EU. In all, just over the half way mark of what, until recently, was generally assumed would be his last term, France's president is clearly acting as if his legacy were still ahead of him. Chirac is unlikely to withdraw voluntarily from politics unless circumstances and his political vulnerabilities dash all reasonable prospects for continuing.

SARKOZY INTENT ON UNDERTAKING HIS OWN LEGACY

4. (C) The deferential culture of the French political class makes Nicholas Sarkozy's open challenge to Chirac's leadership of the center-right remarkable. Sarkozy, until recently Chirac's spotlight-grabbing Finance and Interior Minister, is now President of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party, the party Chirac founded in 1995 to fuse the different strands of the center-right -- and support his successful bid for the presidency that year. (To Chirac's credit, he has all along excluded the far-right National

Front from his center-right coalitions.) To his great chagrin, Chirac had to accede to Sarkozy's election as head of the UMP. Sarkozy decided to use his genuine popularity among party members to seize control of the party once Alain Juppe gave up the party presidency, in July 2004, a few months following his conviction on corruption charges (reftel). For Sarkozy, the UMP is the platform from which to launch his bid for the French presidency in 2007. Sarkozy's direct assault on Chirac's leadership of the center-right, not surprisingly, has exacerbated the long-standing rivalry between them.

15. (C) Sarkozy's youth, activism, and American-like enthusiasm for entrepreneurship resonate with those in France who advocate reforms to better adapt the economy and society to globalization -- the very areas of Chirac's poor showing as a domestic leader. Sarkozy's nomination as the center-right's candidate in 2007 would be a bitter personal defeat for Chirac. By keeping open the option that he might run again himself, Chirac keeps Sarkozy off balance, whipsawing Sarkozy between positioning himself against the Socialists and positioning himself against Chirac.

RIVALRY WILL PERSIST

16. (C) The rivalry between Sarkozy and Chirac is a battle both to define what the center-right stands for and to become its standard bearer in 2007. Chirac, particularly in recent years, has become more statist (including with regard to social policy), more "Gaullist" (particularly in regard to American leadership) and more "Republican" (in the sense of holding firm to the traditional French view that religion and other cultural allegiances have no place in the public sphere). Sarkozy, on the other hand, is considered more market-oriented with regard to economic policy, an "Atlanticist" (both because of his predilection for the U.S. and his "American" style), and what the French call "communitarian" -- seen in Sarkozy's willingness to extend official recognition to ethnic and religious identities via affirmative action policies or state subsidized training of religious leaders.

17. (C) The intensity of the media coverage that followed Sarkozy's every move as Minister of the Interior and later as Minister of Economy during 2004 -- focussing in particular on those actions seen as signaling Sarkozy's defiance of the President -- will likely diminish in 2005. However, the battle between "Chiracquiens" and "Sarkozists" over control of party funds and over the rules whereby the party will choose its candidate for 2007 will remain intense. Sarkozy enjoys enthusiastic popularity among party rank-and-file, and so far, has kept the momentum of being the party's clear-cut leader for the future. However, Chirac's power, as an incumbent president and founder of the party, in particular over the party's senior, elected office holders, should not be underestimated. Sarkozy has advocated -- to the vociferous objection of supporters of President Chirac in the party -- that the party choose its nominee via a primary-like process in which party members vote. Current party rules are deliberately imprecise -- permitting the party leader's self-proclamation of his candidacy, as has been the practice on the right since the days of de Gaulle.

FIVE MORE YEARS?

18. (C) Many media commentators insist that Chirac has made it amply clear that he wants five more years in the Elysee Palace. For example, asked by a student at an event in November 2004, "When you leave the presidency, in 2007 or 2012, what accomplishment will you be proudest of?" Chirac shot back, jokingly but tellingly, "Why 2012? Why not 2017?" In addition, many informed observers insist that the positions Chirac is taking on important issues, particularly in foreign affairs, are aimed at giving him that "personification of France" aura that has always played well to voters here. Indeed, Chirac's relatively healthy level of popularity after 10 years as president is largely due to the "credit" he earned "standing up to the U.S." over Iraq. For now, Sarkozy remains the obstacle that overshadows all others on Chirac's road to another term. Projecting himself as the only political figure with the experience and stature to see to France's international role, including its role in the evolution of the EU, along with his familiarity to an electorate heavy with older voters, may be enough to put him over the top in a race against, for example, Socialist Party First Secretary Francois Hollande, who has never held a ministerial post.

CONCLUSION

19. (C) The presidential elections of 2007 are still two and half years away. Jacques Chirac will soon have been president for 10 years and shows no signs of wanting to stop. In his New Year's address to the diplomatic corps, for example, Chirac was clearly focussed on the future -- he seemed a man energized for the campaign trail. 2005 will be

a year of decision for Chirac himself, and for France on a number of key issues -- issues that have bedeviled Chirac (the pace and direction of domestic reform) and issues that have shown him at his best (the EU Constitution and support for Turkey's accession to the EU). Chirac wants to keep the levers of power responsive to him. Withdrawing as a potential candidate in 2007 would make Chirac a particularly lame, lame duck. For all these reasons, Chirac will be careful, during coming months, to act like a candidate-to-be, hoping opportunism and circumstance will allow him to follow through successfully.

Leach